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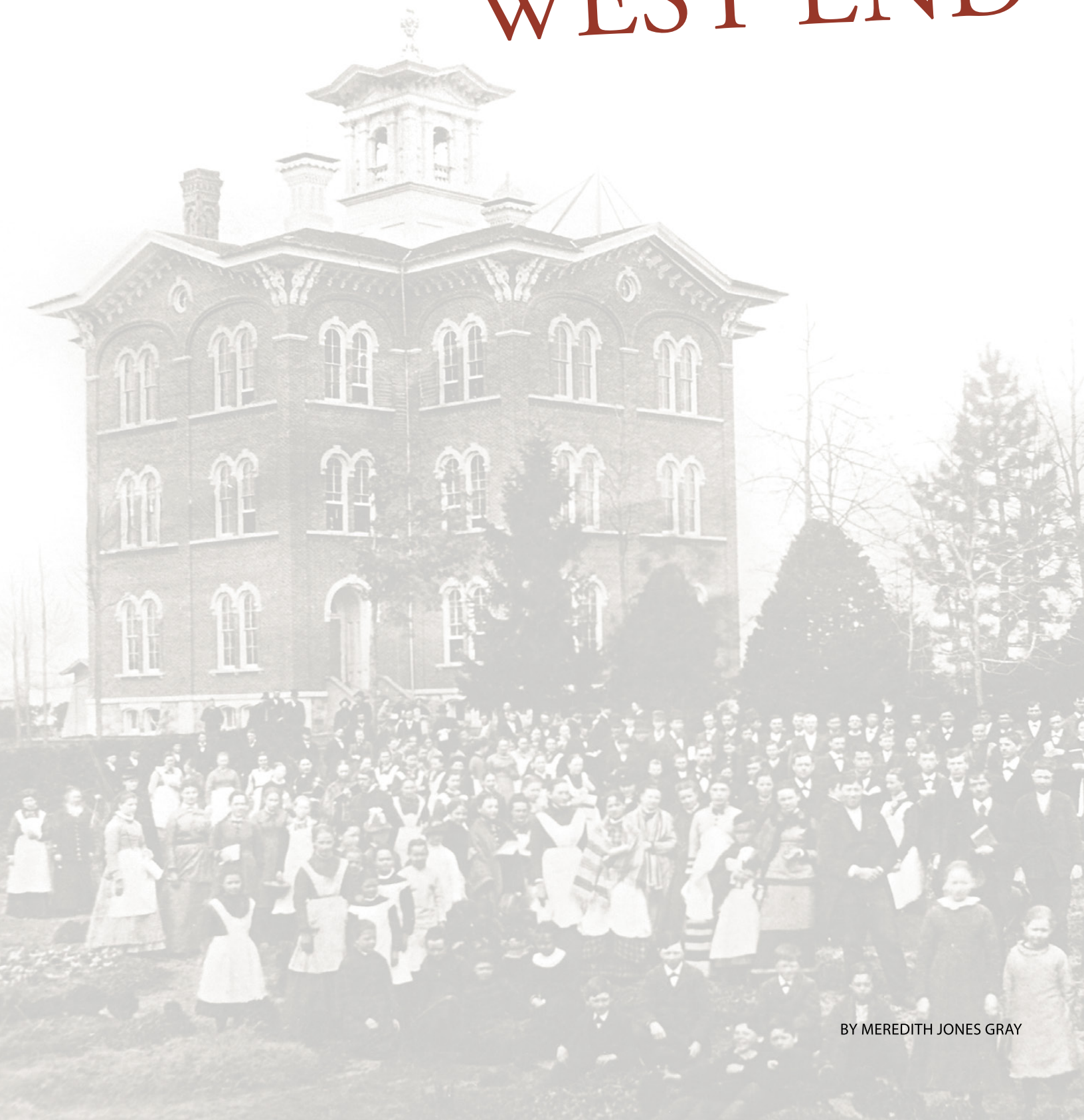
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# CRISIS IN THE WEST END



BY MEREDITH JONES GRAY

BITTER RIVALRY, RESENTMENT, BACKSTABBING, AND NAME-CALLING, THE SAD CIRCUMSTANCES LEADING TO THE YEAR-LONG CLOSING OF BATTLE CREEK COLLEGE ARE A LESSON IN HUMAN FRAILTY AND GOD'S INFINITE PATIENCE.

“I fully believe it is in the order of God that we should have a school started....That there will be great difficulties to surmount and obstacles to be overcome we do not doubt, as there have been in every enterprise undertaken by our people. But we have seen the work move forward, because we believe God has a hand in it.” So wrote George I. Butler, General Conference president, from “the road” in Civil Bend, Missouri, on May 22 of 1872.<sup>1</sup>

The establishment of Battle Creek College was still two years away, and Butler’s projection could not have been more accurate: difficulties and obstacles lay ahead of the new denomination and its educational enterprise. Obstacles as deceptively simple as frozen pipes; difficulties as painful as deep rifts between staff members. Nonetheless the small college would survive, even thrive, for a quarter of a century on its original site until another round of troubles helped to send it on to a new location and a new set of challenges and triumphs.

## OUR BELOVED COLLEGE

Under the administration of Sidney Brownsberger, a well-educated man thoroughly dedicated to the message of his new faith, Battle Creek College became an established fixture in the city and grew quickly. Visiting in the spring of 1881, General Conference President Butler rendered a glowing report: “I am assured by the teachers that never since it was founded has better feeling prevailed in the school than at the present season....This winter over three hundred students have been in attendance,—more than ever before.”<sup>2</sup>

Brownsberger appeared to be well liked by the majority of students and



Sidney Brownsberger

teachers, and the school seemed to be thriving except for a troublesome debt, but being at the helm exacted its toll on Brownsberger’s health. Just three months after Butler’s commendation was published, Brownsberger resigned before the end of the school year, citing ill health, and went with his family to Ohio to try to recover.<sup>3</sup>

It would be hard to replace the accomplished head of the school, especially in a denomination that could not boast many members with graduate degrees. So Alexander McLearn seemed a true godsend to the trustees casting about for a new leader for the young college. The son of a Presbyterian minister, McLearn had converted to the Baptist faith and become a minister. He had a doctor of divinity degree from Prince of Wales College.<sup>4</sup> He had learned about the Sabbath message from a Seventh Day Baptist tract and had attended Seventh-day Adventist meetings. Although he referred to himself as a convert<sup>5</sup> (perhaps he meant specifically to the Sabbath message), there is no direct evidence that he became a Seventh-day Adventist. But

James White and Uriah Smith gave their stamp of approval. Wrote White: “Bro. McLearn is a highly educated Christian gentleman. He has made great sacrifices in coming with us. We should be pleased to see him holding a position of importance in the cause.”<sup>6</sup>

Before the school year started, however, James White was dead and the Adventist West End of Battle Creek was reeling from shock and sorrow. A grieving Ellen White had left for California. George Butler was, of necessity, on the road often. Perhaps in calmer times wise leaders would have seen the potential for trouble at the college. But in the demoralized, destabilized community, only a couple of months into the fall term, tensions began to rise and before anyone realized what was happening, the crisis was full blown. At the heart of the controversy stood the new President McLearn versus an old founder of the school, veteran grammar teacher, and devotee of Christian education as outlined by Ellen White, Goodloe Harper Bell.

Bell was heavily invested in the church and in the school and was also set in his ways. He reigned supreme in the grammar classroom and always had. He wasn’t about to change for some “outsider,” especially if he felt that person threatened the mission of the school he had helped to establish. McLearn, from his side, probably felt it important to establish his authority in his new position. He was after all, the man with the degree. Furthermore, he wanted to win over his new constituents...and found the perfect way. McLearn became immensely popular with the student body when he single-handedly revoked the rule against socializing between young men and women.<sup>7</sup>



Unhappy, Bell made plans to leave the school and pursue Sabbath School work full-time, because “he was not properly appreciated by his associates,” feeling “that they were rather working against him and injuring his influence.”<sup>8</sup>

The newly elected college board suddenly awoke to the fact that the peace of the school year had been disturbed and began to make inquiries. They were appalled to discover that Bell was planning to leave in the middle of the year and felt that the college would suffer terrible embarrassment if he did. They urged him to stay. He refused without some assurance of support from the board and the college, whereupon the board drew up a paper reestablishing the “privileges and duties” that he had held under the previous administration.<sup>9</sup>

### THE COLLEGE CIRCUS

Within twenty-four hours the board had a full-scale faculty rebellion on their hands. The other teachers issued a statement to the board that they would all resign unless “the paper” given to Bell was rescinded. Eventually, in dialogue with the board, all but three withdrew their objections. The three, President McLearn, along with Professors E. B. Miller and J. S. Osborne, were invited to meet with the board. McLearn asserted that he had come to Battle Creek “to administer the affairs of the college” and that he would not “be made a nobody.”<sup>10</sup>

Still, some of the board members felt that they had almost come to a resolution when it became clear that one of the board members, chair Uriah Smith, in fact, sympathized with the college men in their hostility toward Professor Bell. Their indignation fueled anew, the college representatives demanded an investigation. Thus, the “circus” began and became public.

The major parties put their accusations in writing. The board held investigative sessions, the shortest of which lasted two hours and the longest eight.<sup>11</sup> Students signed petitions and held “indignation meetings.” The anti-Bell contingent hunted up student witnesses who would testify against the professor. “The Moon,”



a newspaper which styled itself as “A daily realistic reflection of the local life history of Battle Creek,” carried lively, opinionated accounts of “The College Circus” from both sides of the controversy.

The faculty was split. His colleague Eli B. Miller leveled ugly accusations against Bell, including the suggestion of improprieties with young women.<sup>12</sup> The board was divided; Uriah Smith,

for whatever reason, repeatedly voted the opposite of the rest of the board throughout the investigation, staunchly supporting McLearn and his cohorts. Only the students seemed to speak with one voice, as if seized by mass hysteria. They jeered Bell in the public meetings and made no secret of their support for McLearn.

The board issued even-handed censures. To Bell for his sometimes harsh



Battle Creek College campus





**Left:** Goodloe Harper Bell  
**Far Left:** Alexander McLearn

and sarcastic treatment of students and, regarding the charge of sexual indecorum, for behavior which, “while not shown to have been prompted by wrong intentions, was of such a character as might give rise to suspicion of unworthy motives.” To McLearn (in spite of Smith’s opposing vote) for assuming “authority to give students permission to violate” the college policies. Bell accepted the censure, assured the board of his repentance, and asked forgiveness. McLearn initially protested, saying that the censure was not justified. But when the board explained that the censure was against his “conduct” and not him personally, he, too, apologized.<sup>13</sup> By a roll call, the faculty unanimously agreed to abide by the board’s decisions.

That should have brought the uproar to an end, but of course such painful events are not so easily laid to rest. Everything remained in disarray. Some of the main faculty instigators, although they had agreed to accept the board’s actions, continued to make incendiary remarks during the student chapel meetings. The board called for their resignation but apparently

allowed them to continue to function as the school year limped to an end.<sup>14</sup> Uriah Smith resigned from the board, had his resignation refused by the board, and then resigned again.<sup>15</sup>

The students continued to harass Bell. In February, Henry McLearn, the president’s son, shoved the professor on the stairs and abused him verbally. According to a report of the incident, “Bell kept telling him [Henry] to stop . . . and put his hand on his arm and held on to him.” This was what Principal McLearn saw as he came around the corner: Bell struggling with his son on the stairs. He issued a stinging rebuke to Bell on the spot. Only later did he suspend his son; the board finished the business and expelled Henry. Three days after the episode, Bell resigned.<sup>16</sup> But until he left Battle Creek for South Lancaster, Massachusetts, on April 4, every time he ventured on campus he met with mistreatment: “Prof. Bell suffers excessively from apple cores and other missiles [sic] when he passes through the College grounds now—if the students are around and the Prof’s [sic] are not. They also never fail to give

three cheers for ‘Old Hermit,’ as they have dubbed him.”<sup>17</sup>

Three distraught board members (C. W. Stone, A. B. Oyen, and J. H. Kellogg) wrote to Ellen White—a long letter outlining the whole sad story from their perspective. The board, now under the direction of George Butler, met throughout the summer, trying to decide whether to have school or not to have school the coming year, given the decimation of the administration and faculty. On August 4 Butler read a letter from Ellen White advising against trying to hold school that fall. She wrote that she would not be able to recommend to anyone to attend the school under the present circumstances. On August 10 the defeated board voted to withdraw the notice about the start of school from the Review, release the teachers from their contracts, and notify the denomination of their decision.<sup>18</sup>

### “UNPLEASANT THEMES: THE CLOSING OF OUR COLLEGE”

On September 12, 1882, a long article appeared under this title in The Review and Herald. It must have been one of the harder things George Butler had ever written, for he preferred, by his own admission, to concentrate on positive things. But he did not hesitate to spell out the pain of the moment: “After carefully viewing the matter from every standpoint, the Board finally decided to close the College. We cannot express the feelings of sadness and distress that we felt before we could bring ourselves to this decision. Months of anxious thought and prayer passed ere we could bring ourselves to the point of proclaiming to the world that our College was closed because of troubles among us. This is a most humiliating step for us to take. It will cause our enemies to rejoice, and cause sadness all through our ranks. But it is preferable to the state of things existing some months in the past.”<sup>19</sup>

The hopeful spirit in which its founders had established the college seemed to have been extinguished



President Littlejohn, seated, with his student assistant

within the space of one short year. Seventy-five thousand dollars, a considerable sum for a church that did not spring from wealth, seemed to have been solicited and spent for a humiliating failure. The future of Battle Creek College looked dim indeed.

### SHALL THE COLLEGE AGAIN BE OPENED? WE ANSWER, YES....

A denomination that thrived on hope, however, could not smother its optimism completely. In December, when the S.D.A. Educational Society, the founding organization of Battle Creek College, held an informal meeting in Rome, New York, the members licked their wounds, did some soul searching, and reaffirmed their course of action in closing the school for a time to gain their bearings. They then resolved to “re-open” the college “as soon as the condition of things in the Battle Creek Church will justify such action, and the Trustees shall be able to procure the services of suitable persons to constitute the faculty of the College.”<sup>20</sup>

The trustees would make some changes if the college reopened. For one thing, they would return to their original philosophy of discipline. To help gain better control of the discipline they would seriously look into providing “a suitable boarding-house” for the students rather than having them live in church members’ homes

all over the West End. They would require manual labor. And they would recommit themselves to the “conducting of the College upon a plan which shall harmonize in all respects with the light which God has given us upon this point through the Testimonies.”<sup>21</sup>

### PRAY AND WORK FOR BATTLE CREEK COLLEGE

Even for those who lived through the experience it must have been hard to believe that the college could descend into chaos and be reduced to closing in twelve short months. Perhaps it was equally difficult to believe—given all the ugly things that had been said and done, all the painful ruptures that had occurred, all the dire predictions that had been made—that one year later the college was ready to go again.

Board chairman Butler reported that during the year of “reflection” and “repentance” for many, the Battle Creek church had, of its own accord, passed a resolution to support the college and its authorities if the school were to reopen. The “different spirit” that the board, Butler, and Ellen White had been seeking from the local Adventist community seemed to be moving among students, former antagonists, and church members.<sup>22</sup>

New college president Wolcott H. Littlejohn reported that eighty students showed up for the beginning of the new school year and more were arriving every day. “What is desired now,” he wrote, “is the hearty co-operation and prayers of all those who believe that there is not only no necessary antagonism between Christianity and learning, but also that he is better qualified to work for God who has a disciplined mind,...than he who, though having an earnest desire to work for the Master, finds himself thwarted in his efforts at every turn by his lack of the very information which it is the province of such a College as ours to impart.”<sup>23</sup>

The golden years of Battle Creek College still lay ahead with enrollments of over 700 students, an ambitious academic program, and great moments of religious revival. Would there be hard times? Certainly. The “difficulties” and “obstacles” George Butler had predicted shook the

school’s very foundations and contributed to its move to Berrien Springs. There the pioneers of Adventist higher education and their descendants faced other crises: terrible financial debt, a flu epidemic that closed the school, the Great Depression, the inability to gain accreditation, among many other bumps in the road.

But George Butler’s other prediction also came true: “I expect to see this comparatively small beginning which is now being made, amount to something very important before the message shall close.” Why? Because “God has a hand in it.”

<sup>1</sup> RH, 4 June 1872, 196-197.

<sup>2</sup> “Our College at Battle Creek,” RH, 15 March 1881, 169.

<sup>3</sup> RH, 23 August 1881, 135.

<sup>4</sup> Albert N. Rogers, Dean of the School of Theology, Alfred University, to David L. Bauer, 13 January 1960. His information about McLearn came from Evalois St. John of the Seventh Day Baptist Historical Society.

<sup>5</sup> James White, “Spring Arbor Camp-Meeting,” RH, 7 June 1881, 360.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Battle Creek College Board Minutes, 5 [sic?] January 1882, AHC.

<sup>8</sup> C.W. Stone, A. B. Oyen, and J. H. Kellogg to Sister [Ellen G.] White, 9 April 1882.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> BCCBdMin, 5 January 1882, AHC.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> BCCBdMin, 5 January and 25 January 1882, AHC.

<sup>14</sup> BCCBdMin, 29 January 1882, AHC.

<sup>15</sup> BCCBdMin, 1 and 8 May 1882, AHC.

<sup>16</sup> Allan G. Lindsay, “Goodloe Harper Bell: Pioneer Seventh-day Adventist Educator,” PhD diss, Andrews University, 1982, 219-220. Lindsay cites a letter from G. I. Butler to W. C. White, 20 February 1882, located in the EGWRC-GC.

<sup>17</sup> “College Cullings,” The Moon, 17 March 1882, 2.

<sup>18</sup> BCCBdMin, AHC.

<sup>19</sup> P. 586.

<sup>20</sup> A. B. Oyen and George I. Butler, “S.D.A. Educational Society,” RH, 2 January 1883, 13.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> “Our College at Battle Creek,” RH, 31 July 1883, 490.

<sup>23</sup> “The Opening of the College,” RH, 11 September 1883, 592.

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Andrews historian and professor of English, Meredith Jones Gray (BA ’76, MA ’77), is author of *As We Set Forth*, and is currently working on the second volume in the Andrews Heritage series.